DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 921 HE 031 442

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TITLE The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education. A National Survey of Americans' Views.

INSTITUTION National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, CA.; Public Agenda Foundation, New York, NY.

PUB DATE 1998-00-00

NOTE 21p.

AVAILABLE FROM National Center for Public Policy & Higher Education, 152 North Third St., Suite 705, San Jose, CA 95112; phone: 408-271-2699; fax: 408-271-2697; e-mail: center@highereducation.org; http://www.highereducation.org

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; Educational Demand; Educational Supply; *Higher Education; Interviews; *National Surveys; *Paying for College; *Public Opinion; Public Policy; Student Responsibility

ABSTRACT

This report presents findings of a telephone survey of 700 Americans nationwide concerning their attitudes about the importance of a higher education. Closed-ended interviews with all respondents were supplemented by in-depth follow-up interviews with some of the respondents; responses from this survey were compared to those from a similar survey conducted in 1993. Five major findings emerged: (1) Americans believe that higher education is more important than it ever has been, both as a key to a middle-class lifestyle and as a resource for the local economy; (2) Americans believe that no qualified and motivated student should be denied an opportunity to attend college because of the cost; (3) while many Americans are still concerned about access to higher education, concerns about students being shut out of college have decreased significantly since 1993; (4) the public believes that what a student gets out of a higher education is what he/she puts into it; and (5) the public opposes policy proposals that limit access to higher education or raise the amount families have to pay, but has not come to a consensus on how society should pay for access. Each of these findings is discussed and the survey results are detailed. (DB)

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THE PRICE OF ADMISSION

The Growing Importance of Higher Education

By John Immerwahr

A National Survey of Americans' Views
Conducted and Reported by Public Agenda

HE 031 442

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Spring 1998

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

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Introduction

In recent years, education has been at or near the top of the public's concerns and it has been a major priority for the president and many of the nation's governors. When leaders and the public speak of education, however, their main concern has typically been the nation's K–12 schools. Today, the focus is turning to higher education (including both two-year and four-year colleges and universities). As America moves into the knowledge-intensive world of the future, a college education will continue to take on much of the importance that a high school education had a generation ago; the growing importance of a higher education has spawned greater public attention and concern.

To examine these issues, Public Agenda surveyed 700 Americans nationwide in February 1998. The respondents were specifically told that the questions about higher education referred to both two-year and four-year higher education, and to both public and private colleges and universities. These closed-ended interviews were also supplemented with in-depth follow-up interviews with a number of the respondents. Because many of the same survey questions were also asked in 1993, the research shows not only what Americans think today but how their attitudes have changed and evolved in the last five years.[1] This study is the first in a series of studies that Public Agenda will conduct in collaboration with the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

Five major findings emerged from the research:

- Americans believe that higher education is more important than it ever has been, both as a key to a middle-class lifestyle and as a resource for the local economy.

- Because higher education has become so important, Americans are convinced that no qualified and motivated student should be denied an opportunity to go to a college or university merely because of the price.

- While many Americans are still worried about access to higher education, concerns about students being shut out of a college education have decreased significantly in the last five years.

- The public believes that what a student gets out of a higher education is a function of what he or she puts into it.

- The public is opposed to policy proposals that limit access to higher education or raise the amount families will have to pay, but has not come to a consensus on how society should pay for access to higher education.

Finding One: The Importance of Higher Education

Americans believe that higher education is more important than it ever has been, both as a key to a middle-class lifestyle and as a resource for the local economy.

In the minds of many Americans, a college education has taken on the status that a high school diploma had a number of years ago. For an overwhelming percentage of Americans, a college education is a necessary prerequisite for a good job and a solid middle-class lifestyle; our findings also show that this emphasis on the importance of a higher education has increased even in the last five years.[2] A man from Altoona, Pennsylvania, put it this way: *"Most everything is getting to be so high-tech today that a high school diploma just won't cut it. When I was in school you could graduate high school and be a pretty good auto mechanic. Today the cars are so full of electronics that you have to go to college just to be able to work on a car."*

The public sees higher education not only as a benefit for the individual but for the local economy. Furthermore, a majority of the public is satisfied that colleges are, in fact, teaching students important things. While people still worry that too many students are wasting their time in college, this is somewhat less of a concern now than it was in the past.

Importance of Higher Education

	1998	*1993*
Which comes closer to your view?		
High school graduates should go on to college because in the long run they'll have better job prospects.	86%	79%
OR		
High school graduates should take any decent job offer because there are so many unemployed people already.	9	13
Getting a college education is *more important* than it was ten years ago.	75	NA
Which comes closer to your view?		
This state needs more college-educated workers so that the state can attract high-tech jobs and businesses.	60	52
OR		
This state already has too many college graduates who are competing for scarce jobs.	30	38
In general, would you say colleges and universities:		
Are teaching students the important things they need to know?*	53	54
OR		
Are failing to teach them the important things they need to know?*	28	33
Very/somewhat serious problem that:		
Many young people are just wasting their time and money in college because they don't know what else to do with their lives.*	59	67

* Wording on this question varies slightly between Public Agenda's 1993 and 1998 studies.

Finding Two: Access for All

Because higher education has become so important, Americans are convinced that no qualified and motivated student should be denied an opportunity to go to a college or university merely because of the price.

The growing sense of the importance of higher education has been accompanied by an increased emphasis on the need to provide opportunities for higher education. Today many Americans are uncomfortable with the idea that motivated and hard-working students may be unable to attend a college or university.

Preserving the Opportunity to Receive a Higher Education

	1998	*1993*
Strongly/somewhat agree that:		
We should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so.	89%	89%
Fair/poor idea to:		
Raise college prices even though some people argue the financial burden on families and students would be too high.*	85	80
Very/somewhat serious problem that:		
Students are having to borrow too much money to pay for their college education.*	87	81

* Wording on this question varies slightly between Public Agenda's 1993 and 1998 studies.

A woman from Shreveport, Louisiana, said it this way: *"If a person is motivated and wants to get a higher education and a higher paying job, they should be given the chance to do it. No one is forcing them to go to college, they are just trying to better themselves."* As a result, people are opposed to measures, such as raising college prices, that would have the effect of making it more difficult for people to get education after high school. In fact, majorities already say that the amount students have to borrow to pay for education is a problem.

Finding Three: Good Times, Fewer Concerns

While many Americans are still worried about access to higher education, concerns about students being shut out of a college education have decreased significantly in the last five years.

Since we first asked these questions in 1993, the situation in higher education has improved for many students and their families. Today the economy is strong and unemployment is low. Although college tuitions and fees rose rapidly during the late 1980s and early 1990s (especially at state institutions), the increases have slowed since that time.[3] As a result, worries about the ability of students to get a college education have lessened.

In our previous studies of attitudes toward higher education in the State of California, we found a close relationship between how people feel about access to higher education and their willingness to call for a fundamental overhaul of the higher education system.[4] Our national findings show the same pattern. As concerns about access to higher education have lessened, there has been a nearly identical drop in the percentage who call for a fundamental overhaul. Although almost four in ten Americans are still calling for fundamental changes, the percentage has dropped substantially since 1993.

Our hypothesis is that public concerns about access to higher education are a key to public thinking about higher education generally. When people are feeling better about access, their overall attitudes toward higher education are more positive. Conversely, if the public were to become even more worried about the opportunity to attend college, the calls for radical reform would jump back up.

Worries About Access Have Lessened Since 1993

	1998	*1993*
Getting a college education will be *more difficult* ten years from now.	53%	66%
Do you believe that currently in your state:		
The vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so?	49	37
OR		
There are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?	45	60
Getting a college education has become *more difficult* than it was ten years ago.	43	55
Which view comes closer to your own?		
This state's public college and university system needs to be fundamentally overhauled.	39	54
OR		
This state's public college system should be basically left alone.	48	33

The greatest concern regarding access is about students from low-income families. Some critics complain that college is becoming available only to the rich who can pay for it and to the poor who can get financial aid. Middle-class families, according to this way of thinking, are too poor to pay for college but earn too much to qualify for financial aid. Our results show that this is not a major concern for the public. Our respondents were more likely to say that it is the poor who have less opportunity to get a college education, rather than the middle class.

Middle-class Americans themselves share this perception that it is the poor who have the most problems gaining access to a college education. The findings also suggest that low income is more likely to be perceived as a problem for access to higher education than is race or ethnicity. Most Americans feel that minority students have the same opportunity to attend higher education as everyone else.

More Concern About Access for Low-Income Families

	Less Opportunity	*More Opportunity*	*About the Same*
Opportunity of certain groups, compared to others, to get a college education:			
Students from low-income families.	49%	13%	36%
Students who are ethnic or racial minorities such as blacks or Latinos.	28	21	49
Students from middle-class families.	24	13	62
People who are older and going back to school for retraining.	23	22	51

Finding Four: The Students' Responsibility

The public believes that what a student gets out of a higher education is a function of what he or she puts into it.

There is a widely shared view that higher education's value is a function of the energy and motivation that the student brings to his or her education, and that the amount of effort a student puts into his or her education is much more important than the quality of the college the student attends. A man from Denver, Colorado, had this to say: *"Don't get me wrong, a quality school has some value. But really, they are teaching the same math at a rinky-dink college that they are at the big state university. They have to, math is math. What matters is how much the kid puts himself into it."*

In other studies we have noted that the public sets high store by the value of reciprocity, namely that rewards should be commensurate with effort.[5] This value clearly comes into play in the public's thinking about higher education, and there is a widespread perception that higher education should not be a "free ride," but should provide an opportunity for those who are motivated and willing to give effort and make sacrifices as well receive benefits. Thus, while people are opposed to raising college prices in a way that keeps students out of college, they also don't think that higher education should be a "free ride." Consistent with their emphasis on reciprocity, most Americans feel that students will value their education more if students pay some of the cost themselves.

The Importance of Motivation and Reciprocity

	1998	*1993*
Strongly/somewhat agree that:		
Students appreciate the value of a college education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying for what it costs.*	77%	76%
Which of the following two statements comes closer to your own view?		
The benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends on how much of an effort he or she puts in.	91	71
OR		
The benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends on the quality of the college he or she is attending?	7	23

* Wording on this question varies slightly between Public Agenda's 1993 and 1998 studies.

The importance of reciprocity also comes into play when people think about financial aid. Without mentioning how these options would be financed, we presented several ideas that state and federal governments could use to make higher education more affordable for academically qualified students. The ideas that received the most support were work-study, giving students tax breaks, and providing more money for loans. What is appealing about these proposals is that they help students and families to pay for their own education and thus increase opportunity, especially for those who are willing to make extra sacrifices. Direct grants to students were less appealing, perhaps because such grants sound more like an entitlement than something that must be earned. A man from Twin Falls, Idaho, made an explicit connection between work-study and reciprocity: "*I think that college students who work to help pay their way do better than those who don't. It disciplines you, and makes you feel more committed to your education because it is not just a free ride.*"

Ways Government Could Make College More Affordable

	1998	*1993*
State and federal government should more often:		
Provide students with opportunities to work for the financial aid they get.*	80%	80%
Give tax breaks to help students and their families pay for college.	75	NA
Make money available for student loans.*	57	62
Grant money directly to students.*	48	43

* Wording on this question varies slightly between Public Agenda's 1993 and 1998 studies.

Finding Five: Who Should Pay?

The public is opposed to policy proposals that limit access to higher education or raise the amount families will have to pay, but has not come to a consensus on how society should pay for access to higher education.

We presented a number of proposals having to do with access to higher education and college financing. Nearly all ideas that increase access to higher education are supported by the public. At the same time, the public is opposed to ideas that limit the number of people who can attend a college or university.

Support for Ideas That Increase Access; Opposition to Ideas That Limit It

	1998
Suppose it became more difficult for colleges and universities to admit everyone who was qualified. Strongly/somewhat favor proposal for dealing with this problem:	
Offer classes in evening and weekend.	94%
Encourage students to take college-level classes in high school.	88
Teach classes over cable TV or on the Internet.	66
Build new public colleges.	63
Provide state money to help students attend private schools.	48
Accept a smaller percentage of those who apply.	32

When it comes to asking who is to pay for these proposals, the picture becomes much more complex. We asked our respondents who should make sacrifices if colleges and universities find it more difficult to admit everyone who is qualified. There was universal agreement that students and their families are already doing everything they can and should not be asked to do more. As far as increasing the burden on students and their families is concerned, the public seems to be saying, "Enough is enough." As an Indianapolis, Indiana, woman said: *"The way I hear it, for the past 10 or 15 years the colleges have been raising their rates faster than inflation. It is hard for me to believe that they have to raise their rates even more."*

But the public is much less clear about who should pick up the slack. Americans are evenly divided as to whether colleges and universities should do more or whether taxpayers should take on a greater part of the burden. There is no consensus at all in either of these areas, suggesting that this is an area that will require greater debate and dialogue in the future.

We have found the same pattern in other areas, such as health care and social security, namely that the public agrees on the importance of the service before they reach consensus on how to pay for it.[6]

Paying for Access to Higher Education

Suppose it became more difficult for colleges and universities in your state to admit everyone who is qualified. To deal with the increase in students who apply for college would mean that some changes and even some sacrifices would have to be made. I'm going to mention several groups and ask if you think they should do more to help solve the problem or if they are doing pretty much all they can already.	*1998*
Students and their families by paying higher fees.	11%
OR	
They are doing pretty much all they can already.	85
Faculty and administrators at colleges and universities by teaching more classes and cutting costs.	44
OR	
They are doing pretty much all they can already.	49
Taxpayers and state government by devoting more tax dollars to solving this problem.	46
OR	
They are doing pretty much all they can already.	49

Endnotes

[1] John Immerwahr and Steve Farkas, *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (San Jose: California Higher Education Policy Center, 1993).

[2] *Closing Gateway*, p. 19.

[3] Ethan Bronner, "College Tuitions Climb 5 Percent, Survey Finds," *New York Times*, Sept. 25, 1997; and National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, "Straight Talk About College Costs and Prices," forthcoming in 1998, available now on the web, p. 11.

[4] *Closing Gateway*, pp. 5–11; and John Immerwahr, *Enduring Values, Changing Concerns: What Californians Expect from Their Higher Education System* (San Jose: California Higher Education Policy Center, 1997), pp. 8–10.

[5] Public Agenda, *The Values We Live By: What Americans Want From Welfare Reform* (New York: 1996), pp. 18–19, 24–25; and *Closing Gateway*, p. 20.

[6] Public Agenda, *Second Opinions: Americans' Changing Views on Healthcare Reform* (New York: 1994), pp. 23–25; and Public Agenda, *Miles to Go: A Status Report on Americans' Plans for Retirement* (New York: 1997), pp. 23–26.

Methodology

This report is based on a telephone survey of 700 randomly selected adult households in the continental United States. Interviews were conducted between February 2 and February 8, 1998, and averaged approximately 15 minutes in length.

Respondents were selected through a standard, random-digit dialing technique, whereby every household had an equal chance of being contacted. The margin of error for the 700 respondents is plus or minus four percent.

Interviews were conducted by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc., of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Survey Sampling, Inc., supplied the sample. Design of the survey instrument and all interpretations of the data in the report were done by Public Agenda.

In addition to the national telephone survey, a small number of open-ended interviews were conducted by telephone with respondents who agreed to be recontacted after the survey had been completed. Quotes were drawn from these interviews to give voice to the attitudes captured statistically through the survey.

The report also draws on findings from *The Closing Gateway* study, prepared by Public Agenda in 1993 for the California Higher Education Policy Center. That study included a similar telephone survey of 502 adults nationally. On some questions there are small differences in question wording between the 1998 and 1993 surveys. These are noted where they occur in this report.

The complete questionnaire results can be ordered from Public Agenda for $20.00.

About the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education was established in 1998 to promote the public interest regarding opportunity, affordability and quality in American higher education. As an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the Center provides action-oriented analyses of state and federal policies affecting education beyond high school. The Center receives financial support from a consortium of national philanthropic organizations, and it is not affiliated with any institution of higher education or with any government agency.

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About Public Agenda

Founded over a decade ago by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how average citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum.

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Dr. Immerwahr is the author of several previous Public Agenda reports on higher education, including *Preserving the Higher Education Legacy: A Conversation with California Leaders* (1995) and *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (1993). In addition, he has authored and coauthored a number of other Public Agenda reports on education, including the groundbreaking national study, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994) and, for the 1996 National Education Summit of the nation's governors and business leaders, *Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda* (1996). Other state-specific studies written by Dr. Immerwahr include *What Our Children Need: South Carolinians Look at Public Education* (1997), *Committed to Change: Missouri Citizens and Public Education* (1996) and *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education* (1993).

Acknowledgments

A number of people have been instrumental in bringing this report to fruition. I am first of all grateful to Patrick Callan, Joni Finney and William Doyle of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. In this and other projects we have done together, I have enormously appreciated their support, wisdom, and spirit of cooperation.

As always, I have relied heavily on the support and insights of my colleagues at Public Agenda, including Deborah Wadsworth, Jean Johnson, and Margaret Dunning.

I am particularly grateful to Public Agenda's research staff, Steve Farkas, Ann Duffett, Stephen Immerwahr, and Joanna McHugh, whose keen analysis and attention to detail I could not have done without.

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